

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula* in Cape Town, South Africa—second record for continental Africa

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Une Aigrette neigeuse *Egretta thula* au Cap, Afrique du Sud—deuxième donnée pour l'Afrique continentale. Une Aigrette neigeuse *Egretta thula* a été observée au Cap, Afrique du Sud, du 8 juin au 1^{er} juillet 2015. Il s'agit de la deuxième observation sur le continent africain, la première ayant également été réalisée dans cette ville, en 2002. Il y a très peu d'observations à l'est de l'océan Atlantique, la majorité provenant de l'ouest Paléarctique. À cause de la ressemblance de l'Aigrette neigeuse avec l'Aigrette garzette *E. garzetta*, l'espèce pourrait passer inaperçue ; les différences entre les deux espèces sont soulignées.

In the afternoon of 8 June 2015, we located a white egret *Egretta* sp. along the Black River, in the southern suburbs of Cape Town, South Africa. It appeared different from the many Little Egrets *E. garzetta* that were also present, due to the yellow on the rear of its legs and the bright yellow lores. Although we suspected it to be a Snowy Egret *E. thula*, our views and photographs were insufficient to clinch the identification. The next morning excellent views were obtained and the bird was positively identified as mainland Africa's second Snowy Egret.

The following features were used to identify it and eliminate Little Egret (Massiah 1996):

- Marginally smaller and appearing more delicate than Little Egret, with a slightly shorter neck.
- Forehead appeared more rounded than in Little Egret, whose forehead is flatter, due to the feathering extending further towards the bill (Fig. 1).
- The bill was slightly shorter, with a more pronounced droop at the tip (Fig. 1).
- The head plumes were distinctly shorter and bushier, forming a loose tuft (Figs. 1–3). Little Egret has 2–3 long and wiry plumes on the hindcrown.
- There were no neck and back plumes, suggesting the bird was either an immature or a non-breeding adult. However, the lores were considered to be too bright for an immature and thus it was probably a non-breeding adult. Breeding-plumage Snowy Egret has obvious plumes on the neck and back.
- Lores bright yellow creating a band above the bill from eye to eye (Figs. 1–5), typical of

adult Snowy Egret. This was one of the most obvious features, clearly differentiating the bird from the Little Egrets present. Breeding-plumage Little Egrets can have yellow-orange lores, but they are never bright yellow. Lores of non-breeding Little Egret are dull greenish yellow.

- Iris golden-yellow compared to the duller yellow of Little Egret (Figs. 1–5).
- The rear of the legs, from the feet to the top of the tibia, were yellow (Figs. 2–5)—perhaps the most conspicuous feature. The yellow wrapped around to cover more of the front of the legs higher up, becoming almost all yellow towards the top of the tibia. Feet slightly brighter yellow than the rear of the legs. Some juvenile Little Egrets can have yellow-green on the legs, but this is generally not restricted to the rear and is never as bright yellow.

Dimorphic Egret *E. dimorpha*, which is sometimes considered conspecific with Western Reef Heron *E. gularis* and Little Egret (Hancock & Kushlan 1984), is perhaps even more similar to Snowy Egret than Little Egret. It breeds in Madagascar, with some wintering in East Africa (Safford & Hawkins 2013), but has never been recorded in South Africa (Hockey *et al.* 2005). White-morph Dimorphic Egret also has bright yellow lores, but head-plume shape, bill shape and overall structure is similar to Little Egret (Safford & Hawkins 2013). Dimorphic Egret can have some yellow on the rear of the legs, but this is generally restricted to the lower tarsi.

White-morph Western Reef Heron, an extremely rare vagrant to South Africa (Hockey *et al.* 2005), is also superficially similar to Snowy Egret, but was eliminated based on the colour



Figure 1. Snowy *Egretta thula* (left; Black River, near Cape Town, South Africa, June 2015; Dominic P. Rollinson) and Little Egret *E. garzetta* (Michael Buckham); note differences in head and bill shape, lores and iris colours, and head-plume shape.

Aigrette neigeuse *Egretta thula* (à gauche ; Black River, près du Cap, Afrique du Sud, juin 2015 ; Dominic P. Rollinson) et l'Aigrette garzette *E. garzetta* (Michael Buckham) ; noter les différences entre les formes de la tête et du bec, la couleur des lores et de l'iris, et la forme de plumes nucales.

Figure 2. Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*, Black River, near Cape Town, South Africa, June 2015 (Dominic P. Rollinson); the shorter, bushy head plumes distinguishing it from Little Egret *E. garzetta* are evident.

Aigrette neigeuse *Egretta thula*, Black River, près du Cap, Afrique du Sud, juin 2015 (Dominic P. Rollinson) ; noter les plumes nucales plus ébouriffées et plus courtes que chez l'Aigrette garzette *E. garzetta*.

Figure 3. The Snowy Egret *Egretta thula* was regularly seen fishing, using its bright yellow feet to stir and flush fish, Black River, near Cape Town, South Africa, June 2015 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

L'Aigrette neigeuse *Egretta thula* a régulièrement été observée en train de pêcher, utilisant ses pieds jaune vif pour faire bouger et débusquer les poissons ; Black River, près du Cap, Afrique du Sud, juin 2015 (Dominic P. Rollinson)



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Figures 4–5. Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*, Black River, near Cape Town, South Africa, June 2015 (Dominic P. Rollinson); the yellow feet and rear of the legs are clearly visible.

Aigrette neigeuse *Egretta thula*, Black River, près du Cap, Afrique du Sud, juin 2015 (Dominic P. Rollinson) ; les pieds jaunes et l'arrière des pattes jaunâtre sont bien visibles.

of the lores (although Western Reef Heron can have yellowish-green lores, they are never bright yellow), bill length (Western Reef Heron has a longer, thicker bill than either Little or Snowy Egret), leg colour (Western Reef Heron generally

has dull brown legs with yellow extending from the feet to the lower legs) and head plumes (long and thin in Western Reef Heron; shorter and bushier in Snowy Egret) (Cramp & Simmons 1977).

The breeding range of Snowy Egret extends from North America, as far north as Maine, to southern Argentina. The North American population migrates to Middle America during the boreal winter, while South and Middle American populations are thought to be more sedentary (Martínez-Vilalta & Motis 1992). The Black River Snowy Egret is therefore thought to have originated from North America, presumably becoming lost while migrating to its wintering grounds.

There have been very few transatlantic records of Snowy Egret, although it is recorded intermittently on Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic (37°20'S 12°25'W), mostly in late summer or early winter (Kushlan & Hancock 2005). The only previous record from continental Africa was a bird near Cape Town on 23 April–4 May 2002 (Hockey *et al.* 2005). Other transatlantic records include: Iceland (three records; Snow & Perrins 1998), Scotland (one record; Jackson 2004), Germany (one record, prior to 1950; Barthel & Helbig 2005), the Azores (*c.* 15 records; Clarke 2006, African Bird Club 2016) and Cape Verdes (one record; Hazevoet 2010).

The Snowy Egret near Cape Town remained in the area until 1 July, a total of 24 days. It was extremely confiding, permitting many observers to approach to within a few metres, especially whilst feeding, using its bright yellow feet to stir and flush prey. The local Little Egrets would not tolerate it encroaching on their immediate feeding area and showed antagonistic behaviour towards the vagrant.

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